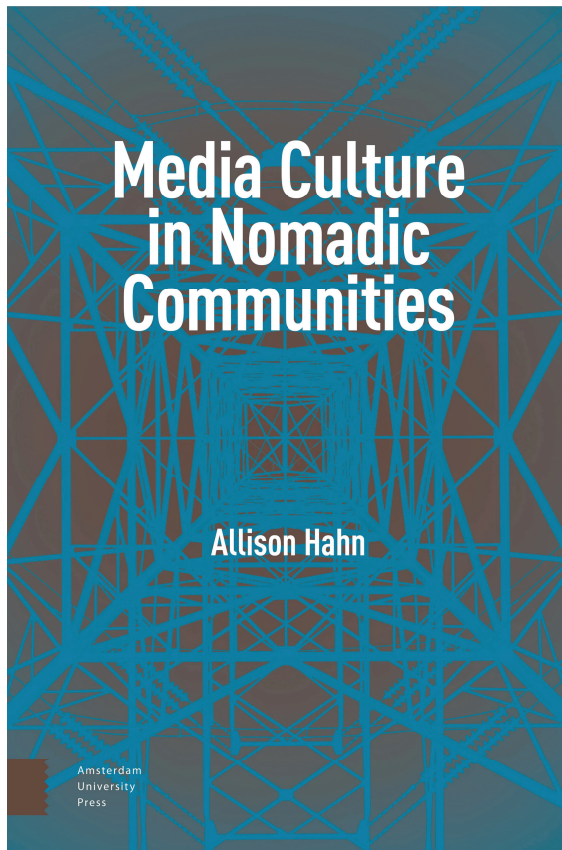# Book Review:

Hahn, Allison. *Media Culture in Nomadic Communities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021)

Patrick Brodie
SCHOOL OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES,
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
patrick.brodie [AT] ucd.ie

Allison Hahn's *Media Culture in Nomadic Communities* is a vital contribution to the study of media technologies and infrastructures among people and places imagined as "remote" to typical spaces of media connection. Hahn argues early on that conceptions of rural and nomadic communities as somehow without technology "obscure[s] the more complex and challenging reality facing rural, mobile, and nomadic communities in today's world," where state development and corporate extraction projects threaten the environments and lifeways of these communities.[1] As digital-enabled and ICT technologies have spread worldwide, careful attention needs to be paid to the patchwork and differential ways in which technologies are rolled-out, accessed, and used across development policy, practical construction and applications, and everyday life, especially as these technologies interface with the very modes and histories of exploitation these communities are facing.

Hahn, early in the book, highlights her mixed-methods anthropological and comparative approach, a twinned ethos that extends

throughout. The introduction (Chapter 1) lingers with her use of the term "nomadic" in the title, which she emphasizes has not been comfortably employed. The concept undoubtedly has persistent colonial connotations, especially in the various forms of settlement and enclosure imposed upon these communities and their lands. Ultimately, Hahn lands on the use of the term due to the centrality of herding communities in the book, but Hahn is interested in communities that are variously rural, nomadic, and/or Indigenous, united by experiences of unequal development and marginalization by state and multinational forces (e.g., corporate mining, pipelines, or regional railway development). While I am still not sure about the use of the term in the title, throughout the book Hahn does mostly ensure specificity in its application and history across contexts, and the final chapter wraps up these concerns in a theoretically satisfying way by complicating the variously privileged and globalized imaginations of "nomadism" and "nomadology" in settled, Western academia.

The book primarily, and most importantly, focuses on the use of cell phone technology and online platforms for organizing life and communication via these technologies in rural communities. As Hahn emphasizes, there is sometimes a popular and academic tendency to approach media technologies and culture from unilateral and polar perspectives—sites and blocs of power are more readily identified, and analysis then tends to focus on how marginalized experiences of powerful media flows affect communities for whom these technologies may not be intended or accessible. Of course, as work on global digital divides and prior work on telecommunications and development has demonstrated, media technologies and their benefits are unevenly developed and accessible across the world. However, equally vital to recognize is that people and communities have found practical and creative ways to make claims on what is accessible to improve their lives and participate in the "public life" frequently imagined, and reserved, for urban dwellers with more access to services and infrastructure. As Hahn quotes a student of hers with rural relatives in Pakistan, bemused with his US classmates: "We are not poor, just different from you."[2] The book powerfully emphasizes that everyday use of media and technology in rural, nomadic, and Indigenous communities globally, whether for work, health, cultural expression, political participation, or activism, operates from the ground-up and in ways that subvert the expectations of the metropole.

Each chapter then provides context for the particular place that she will be analyzing, told through brief histories, uses, and exemplary encounters between people, communication technologies, and state or other political and institutional formations. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the book's primary sites and concerns, focusing on the contemporary development of rural ICTs in relation to electricity, mass media, and "public spheres" in the often "mobile" communities under analysis. Setting up sticking points for the remainder of the book, Hahn remains interested in the use of ICTs across the smaller-scale decisions of everyday life in rural communities and the large-scale decision-making of state power and international politics.

Chapters 3 and 4 appear to me as the center-points of the book—in Chapter 3, Hahn focuses on how Maasai herders in Kenya and Tanzania have mobilized online petitions to protest against their communities' displacement for conservation and tourism; Chapter 4 then turns to discussing the use of social media in opposition to the Chinese state in Inner Mongolia, especially surrounding mining conflicts. Each case is extremely rich and details the

importance of media use and access in the organization and the visibility of rural and "remote" communities. However, each comes with a particular methodological compromise due to the complexity of the contexts being introduced in such a short span, especially for non-native researchers. In Chapter 3, Hahn turns to concepts of the "public sphere" in terms of international (and orientalist) viewpoints toward rural decision-making, which, as later analysis will argue, somewhat flattens the global landscape within which these politics functions. Chapter 4, then, which must engage with the complexity of ICT development in extremely hard-to-access regions, relies largely on discourse analysis available from the imperfect English-language sources available. As Hahn clarifies, "There is a rich, detailed set of events contained in this chapter, but only a few access points."[3] Those few access points are of course familiar to anyone doing research into rural places, and in Hahn's context, this is something she encounters frequently across the book.

The remaining chapters present quite a dizzying array of media usage across contexts that are connected by various vectors of rurality, nomadism, and Indigeneity. Chapter 5 presents a fascinating case study of the circulation of Bedouin poetry and its relation to these communities' global perception and political situation; Chapter 6 returns more directly to decision-making, in the analysis of Mongolia's 2015 "cell phone referendum" on mining, the first of its kind, wherein each SIM card in the country had a (limited) vote on mining development policy. Chapters 7 and 8 describe the international protests and solidarity movements of Sámi reindeer herders across Arctic Europe and Indigenous anti-pipeline water protectors in North America at Standing Rock (respectively), primarily interested in how social media and global media perceptions were shaped and navigated surrounding these movements. Returning to earlier portions of the book in the construction of marginalized "image testimony" and its role in decision-making, the final chapter turns toward the role of the international community and academics in particular in advocating for Indigenous groups and their responses to climate change. Looking especially at how media and academic research interlink and can act in tandem to produce more just outcomes for these groups, the book concludes with a strong account of the ways that media use and the global connections it offers can act as "quilting points" across aligned contexts.

The global frame, across multiple communities and employing a comparative approach across the different contexts under discussion through the chapters, is one of the book's primary selling points, as it introduces new and fascinating connections between places sometimes only ambivalently connected, as the introduction details. However, to this reader, it is also what raises the most unresolved issues, as the individual chapters sometimes feel as though the breadth of the book's inquiry has somewhat overwhelmed the depth of anthropological detail. Hahn acknowledges that some of the chapters have relied on perhaps imperfect public sources due to the difficulty of accessing information and the aforementioned limited "access points." But the dependence upon discourse analysis in many cases somewhat undermines the argument about the dense, layered, and varied types of media use characterizing the communities under discussion, which map onto historical and geographical currents that are sometimes lost in a comparative approach and within the (frequently international) discourses available. I completely understand Hahn's methodological decisions—this is less a critique than a shared recognition of the ongoing difficulties, conundrums, and compromises that arise when doing new media research in rural areas, especially in a comparative approach.

Something incredibly insightful shared across most of the chapters, and which will be of special interest to media industry and infrastructure scholars focusing on the environmental impacts of ICT development, is the re-occurring theme of extractive and uneven economic development and its sparking of particular kinds of ICT use and online participation in rural, nomadic, and Indigenous communities to communicate and share grievances. Of course, much work in media studies has focused on the use of digital and social media within activist movements and organizations in recent years, in particular the importance of repurposing these platforms during the uprisings of the Arab Spring.[4] However, equally vital, as Hahn emphasizes, is the sharing and articulating of both the *content* and *context* of solidarities across apparently disparate traditionally nomadic and Indigenous groups in the different global localities she traces, especially in the face of development projects.

Hahn is primarily interested in the communicative rather than environmental context—how these groups share grievances, but also how these development projects frequently rest on a breakdown, or historical absence, of communication between developers (state or private) and the communities bisected or displaced by development and extractive projects. In the Introduction, Hahn argues that "the expectation of primitivism can result in a misalignment of development projects or overbearing projects that presume herders do not have the education or experience to determine which technologies can or should be used by their communities."[5] In the final chapter, Hahn deftly demonstrates how images, representations, and visual culture, especially through a global media framework, have frequently led to the reproduction of particular "backward" and other culturally harmful stereotypes and appropriations that have historically led to further justification for the marginalization and exploitation of rural Indigenous communities by state formations and development projects.[6] However, the connection is somewhat left incomplete between the logics of media as/for "development" and the *developmental* ideologies and frictions that still shape relationships between global media formations and places of their use (and subversion). The use of ICTs for political activism is a compromised one, especially through multinational platforms like YouTube, which open up possibilities for profit-driven exploitation of data via surveillance and the misappropriation of information. Relatedly, the same ideologies of "primitiveness" used as a tool to "oppress herding communities" are the ones that drive the foundations of the infrastructural and extractive development being faced and navigated by these communities in the first place.[7] Their use and subversion of official state systems and private provision of infrastructure are of course essential and savvy, but within what field of tension does this exist? In its focus on the potentials and otherwise under-appreciated extent and diversity of media use in rural and nomadic communities, the role of media institutions, public and private, within these uneven systems of power remains fuzzy in Hahn's presentation.[8]

This tension—and very real difference—between the popular relationships to state, corporate media, and international development among rural, nomadic, and Indigenous communities is complicated by a global anthropological viewpoint that remains somewhat distancing in its breadth. With this in mind, and maybe it is a matter of preference, but the book really comes alive when describing minutiae, details, and field encounters, especially early on in the book, when, for example, Hahn describes the ways in which Maasai herders will text friends to determine market prices for livestock in town before setting their prices;[9] or when trying

to source camels for the experiences of restless international undergraduate students via quick cell phone calls and informal rural social networks in Inner Mongolia;[10] or when Hahn describes a post from a Mongolian Facebook group with 40,677 followers expressing solidarity with the Standing Rock protesters.[11] These moments of clarity and texture are enormously effective, and affecting, in sharpening the argument that each context of media use, however much they rely on similar technologies, also has distinct local practices and histories.

In a more global frame, what I would have liked to see articulated more are the relationships, frequently uneasy, between the international discourses of "rights" and development employed across the book and the violent processes by which these are (often transnationally) undermined via communication and PR. The book's media focus is largely interested in political and cultural participation and "decision-making" at broader, usually national or international, levels. Most chapters of the book reference how the rural, nomadic, and Indigenous communities represented are consistently beset by threats of displacement, cultural destruction, environmental degradation, and extractive projects, whether a cross-European railroad in Sámi territory in Finland or multinational open-pit mining on herding lands in Mongolia or an oil pipeline cutting across Standing Rock, which are unfortunately recognizable moments of late capitalist inheritance of colonial developmental strategies.

There are of course today international regulations in place, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (in place since 2007), which requires "informed consent" of Indigenous communities on extractive projects. But as Hahn paraphrases Standing Rock Sioux councilman Randy White, "it is not consultation when plans have already been created,"[12] and in many cases it is clear that consultation does not happen, only happens superficially, or is not "required" based on interpretations of human rights law and/or planning legislation. This is a frequently maligned characteristic of development projects worldwide, including in Ireland, where I do research, and rural communities unfailingly report that they are only brought to the table once the plans are unshakeable and already backed by the state. But unlike the largely white, European rural communities in Ireland, the communities that Hahn focuses on are frequently denied or only differentially granted "rights" within these racialized governing frameworks, which, however well-intentioned, are guidelines that are unfortunately difficult to enforce across the frequently (settler) colonial governmental frameworks and bordered geopolitical territories that these communities exist within. Ultimately, the international goals of an organization like the UN do not question "development" as such but rather advocate for how it can be done more "equitably" or "sustainably," when perhaps it is the process and global framework of development itself that need to be—and are frequently being—questioned by rural, nomadic, and Indigenous community activists. What compromises do these global visibilities advocated by Hahn rely upon for more radical frameworks like land back and sovereignty movements in these communities? What I hope readers will draw out of the book, though, is the recognition that moments of solidarity across these different contexts present a site from which to build more complex understandings of global rurality and the strategies and tactics that can be shared across rural and Indigenous communities, which can operate in tandem with or independent from the global governance frameworks designed to protect tenuously rights-bearing individuals, communities, and environments.

As a scholar of media infrastructure and environmental contestation frequently focused on the rural, I am excited to see such an extended engagement with rurality in Hahn's *Media*

Culture in Nomadic Communities. The book is a vital contribution to building these more complex frameworks in media studies and is part of a still-growing subfield that is interested in the materialities and implications of media development in contexts imagined and treated as "remote" and unsophisticated in media access, use, and understanding. The book leaves readers with an expansive and complicated view of the ambivalent spread of new media technologies and tactics across several national and transnational case studies. My relatively minor critiques are a result of my eager and appreciative reading of the book, itself the product of an extremely expansive and necessary study into the various ways in which traditionally nomadic and otherwise "remote" communities access, experience, and instrumentalize contemporary ICT devices and tactics. More specifically, the book is a great reference point for anyone, myself included, looking at the intersections of infrastructure, land, and ICT development in rural contexts across the world, and how media can act as both a worthwhile political tool and, in more complex cases, a poison pill for truly just and sustainable development of these areas.

Patrick Brodie is an Assistant Professor and Ad Astra Fellow in the School of Information and Communication Studies at University College Dublin. His research focuses on the environmental implications of digital media infrastructure, with a particular interest in systems of energy, extractivism, and their effects on rural communities.

[1] Allison Hahn, *Media Culture in Nomadic Communities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 8.

[2] Ibid., 8.

[3] Ibid., 78.

[4] See, e.g., Zahera Harb, "Arab Revolutions and the Social Media Effect," *M/C Journal* 14, no. 2 (2011); Cristina Moreno-Almeida and Shakuntala Banaji, "Digital use and mistrust in the aftermath of the Arab Spring: beyond narratives of liberation and disillusionment," *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 8 (2019): 1125–1141.

[5] Hahn, *Media Culture*, 16.

[6] Ibid., 170–172.

[7] Ibid., 16.

[8] Other books in the last decade have proved exceptional at navigating these complexities of public and private infrastructural build-out of network technologies, in the US context and beyond, including Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Marisa Duarte, *Network Sovereignty: Building the Internet across Indian Country* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2017); Christopher Ali, *Farm Fresh Broadband: The Politics of Rural Connectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).

[9] Ibid., 53.

[10] Ibid., 75–76.

[11] Ibid., 152.

[12] Ibid., 156.